DON"T REPRESS YOUR RELIGION
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A young Irishman had been appointed law clerk to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, the first Roman Catholic to be selected for the position. It was in the days when clerks lived in the homes of the Justices, and when he presented himself he was greeted by Mrs. Holmes, a stern, New England matron. She said: "Young man: I know all about you. You are a Catholic. We are Unitarians. What do you know about that?" He answered: "Some reformed kind of Congregationalism?" "We are from Boston," Mrs. Holmes replied. "You must be something in Boston, and Unitarianism is the least you can be." (A Rebirth of Virtue, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, The Washington Monthly, February 1982)

That is not fair to the Unitarians, of course. But the story does portray an affinity which is very real in what we euphemistically call"main-line" churches; namely, that the actual content of the religion involved should be the least we can get away with. We have an affinity for religion which is cool, laid-back, casual, lukewarm in fact, to use the term another observer employed nearly nineteen hundred years ago. Hans Kung believes that "it is the spiritual that is repressed today, more than the sexual," an altogether intriguing thought. Kung, and he is by no means alone in his analysis, thinks we live in a time that has given us far more permission than we need for sexual expression, while, at the same time, strongly encouraging us to repress any religion we might be feeling.

We have a bit of a bias against too much zeal in religion. Unfortunately, we have had experience with a kind of zeal which seems more a self centered crusade, and which cannot see any truth but its own: the phenomenon Santayana had in mind when he defined a zealot as "a man who loses his aim and redoubles his effort." If we needed a reminder, the Jonesville tragedy demonstrated again the demonic potential of fanatical religion. We are not comfortable with emotionalism of any sort, save that special dispensation enjoyed by everyone and anyone who attends an Ohio State football or basketball game. Religion that gets too personal, too private, too exuberant, too emotional - is irrational we believe and worse, undignified. We prefer a religion slightly cerebral, casual, unemotional and demanding. We get, of course, what we want - churches that are casual, unemotional, undemanding and if current trends continue, just about extinct.

We might find it interesting, therefore, to consider the situation of a Christian Church which tried to be casual and almost disappeared a long time ago, and the words an ancient Saint wrote to the people of that church. The situation is fascinating. It was near the end of the first century. The Roman Emperor was probably Domitian. He and his predecessors had decided that one way to bind widely divergent cultures together in one, unified Empire, was to establish a common religion. The Imperial Cult Religion included temples, shrines, altars to the Emperors, living and dead,anda priesthood to preside over the ceremonies. The only people exempt from participating in the religious ceremonies were the Jews. The Romans finally learned a lesson about Jewish commitment to Monotheism. So long as the early Christians were a branch of Judaism, they too were exempt from universal participation in Emperor worship. But by the turn of the century the Church and Synagogue had separated: most of the Christians were not Jewish and therefore

were expected to bow to the image of the Emperor. Their refusal to do so was a major source of irritation to the authorities. They were subjected to all sorts of pressure to conform. Actually, the Romans didn't object to Christian belief and practice so long as the Christians participated in the Temple Cult. Some did. Some made what seems, frankly, to be a logical compromise. Some must have simply dropped out, but more tried to have it both ways. That is the situation which prompted a Christian exile by the name of John to write a book called Revelation. His purpose was to shore up a sagging church; to inspire courage, commitment, decisiveness in people about to make some compromises.

Actually, he wrote to seven churches in what we know today as Turkey. In the letter to the church at Laodicea, he chose colorful language. "I know your works. You are neither hot or cold. Because you are lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth." For the writer there was no middle ground, no compromise between absolute faithfulness to Jesus Christ and Emperor worship. You could not, in his opinion, be a lukewarm Christian. Lukewarmness is uninteresting. Is there anything so sad as a cup of room-temperature coffee? It's spring training time and Pete Rose, Billy Martin, Reggie Jackson, and George Steinbrenner make baseball newsworthy and interesting and fun. None are lukewarm! Muzak, the insipid harmonics by which we buy groceries, ride elevators and get our teeth drilled can be infuriating if you listen to it carefully. Most of us prefer life hot or cold, but not in between. Lukewarm means indifferent, which means lacking in individuality, character, which usually means boring. Most of us don't care for it.

Except in our religion. Religion is often bland. Religion, it has been observed, seems to celebrate passive dependency as a model personality. By talking about sinfulness solely in terms of rebellion, religion seems sometimes to positively favor submissive, inactive indifference. One critic observed: "Who can blame people for being indifferent. Most of them look on religion as a series of statements they find it impossible to believe. They are not sure there is a God, and they do not think it matters very much one way or the other."

I don't know many people, frankly, who are openly hostile towards religion. I don't know may people who are vocally atheist. I know many people who are indifferent, who have concluded that what the church is about is best characterized by the now famous New York Subway Graffiti. Someone had written, "Christ is the answer". Immediately beneath it an honest soul had scribbled, "What's the question?"

Graham Cole, former Professor of Religion at Williams College wrote, "God prefers the chill blast of an atheist's unbelief to the lukewarm blandness of a person who simply doesn't care, to whom it makes no difference." And Emerson, reflecting on the omnipresent sticky piety of the literature of his day, asked dryly if there was anything "so ungodly as these polite bows to God in English books." (Loren Eisely, The Star Thrower, p. 215)

I submit that there is more religion, more warmth, more passion, more deeply felt faith, and deeply held belief, in all of us than most of us dare to reveal, or wish to reveal, or are able to reveal. The Pennsylvania Presbyterian in me

likes to think that dignity and orderliness and reserve are good ideas, and that religion worn on the sleeve is not necessarily more authentic than religion treasured in the privacy of the heart. But the pastor takes issue and increasingly suspects that unexpressed religion is about as satisfying as an unsneezed sneeze, or a hug contemplated but not given, or an "I love you" kept to oneself. The pastor increasingly concludes that there is an inherent riskiness about this precious sophistication, this studied reserve, which is so terribly important to us. I wonder, frankly, if we don't miss something important about faith, about life, in the process of struggling so valiantly to be unaffected, controlled, buttoned down.

Hans Kung suggests that we repress religion. In a section of Sigmund Freud, he writes: "In Freud's Vienna, before the First World War, a period of Victorian prudery - the problem of repressed sexuality was rightly placed at the center of therapeutic efforts - Should we not now consider the problem of the repressed religious feeling?" (Does God Exist?, p. 321)

Not caring used to be a sin. Careful indifference may be fashionable but there was a time when it was regarded as very serious business indeed. "Sloth" was the theological term for it and it was one of the traditional seven deadly sins. We are inclined to define sloth as laziness: when we encounter the word in the traditional confession we think, I fear, about unwashed dishes, unraked leaves. Sloth, however, is a serious matter - or at least the church used to think it was. Sloth came from the Greek "acedia" which means "not caring". It means being less than you can be. On a grand scale it is the opposite of prideful rebellion. It is the refusal to be fully human. It is the abdication of responsibility for one's own life. Sloth, one of my favorite writers says, was the sin of the German people who performed the menial functions around the extermination camps. Sloth allowed them to plant the flowers, drive the trucks, wash the windows, committing genocide simply by doing their jobs. Sloth is the theme of Cabaret, that tragedy masquerading as a musical comedy, when the main character simply refuses to see the anti-semiticism all around her and chooses to anesthetize herself in pleasure seeking.

The appeal of sloth is subtle. The temptation of lukewarmness in religion is powerful. It is safe. Lukewarm water may not be as cleansing as hot, nor as refreshing as cold, but neither will it scald nor freeze you. Political sloth may not be exciting and exhilerating, but it won't get you in jail, or make you unpopular with your neighbors. Personally, to withhold your love, your total commitment may not be terribly satisfying, but neither will it break your heart. Theologically, lukewarmness is far more comforting than confronting the tough questions. It's far safer to deal with trivialities than with the existence of God, the meaning of life, the possibilities, the hopes, the future...

It was Albert Schweitzer, I believe, who said once that the function of religion is never to dispense easy answers to life's difficult questions. The true function of religion, he said, was to make certain the right questions were being asked. Who can remain indifferent about the meaning of one's own life?

Who can remain indifferent before the majesty and incredible mystery of the whole created order? Who is indifferent about suffering and dying and loving and dreaming? Those are the agenda of vital religion.

And outside the perimeters of heart and hearth and congregation, who can remain indifferent, uncaring about the life and death matters now before the entire nation? There is one on my heart, about which I cannot remain lukewarm any longer. The United States of America owns 25,000 nuclear weapons. We are about to build 17,000 more. It is a very major decision, and by my light, a very wrong one. What I wish to do this morning and what I hope the combined voices of the churches across the nation accomplishes - is to make it impossible for you to be indifferent about the decision. I do not, please understand, claim divine support for my opinion on the matter. What I believe deeply is that it is such an overwhelming departure that it is wrong, morally wrong, to be uncaring, lukewarm, about it.

Former General Counsel for the Defense Department, Paul Warnke, said recently, "I think the average American doesn't think much about nuclear war. He doesn't think about it because, in the first place, it's almost unthinkable and secondly, because he assumes there's nothing he can do about it anyway." (The Sciences, March 1982, p. 23) After an immense amount of reading, I have begun to think about it, reluctantly, unwillingly, painfully. I have been indifferent - lukewarm. I am no longer.

The season of Lent recalls a love so deep it would not let us go - the very antithesis of lukewarmness. The season of Lent celebrates a God profoundly different from the detached, uncaring, unfeeling gods of the ancient world. Lent is the supremely Christian celebration of a God who cares, a God who made human life with gentle, caring, creativity, a God who values each life and nurtures it into maturity. Lent is the Christian memory of a God who became human and was born and lived as we live and died as we die; a God so committed to us that suffering and humiliation and alienation were simply and quietly and bravely accepted, in order that people like you and me might know that we are loved.

Lent is about a God who hurts with us, as a parent experiences the pain of his or her children; a God who rejoices when our joy overflows; a God so totally and utterly committed to us that even crucifixion didn't defeat or discourage him.

It's all right to care deeply. It's all right to say "I love you" to your wife or husband, or son or daughter, or mother or father, or friend. It's all right to weep the tears of joy or grief; it's all right to be angry at unfairness, to curse at life and injustice - and it's all right to be moved by truth and beauty and the miracle of another's love for you.

Lent ought to be, in fact, not only the corporate memory of our Lord's passion, but the deep response which that evokes; a rebirth of caring. God, we believe, is not lukewarm about us. It's a good time, this Lenten season, to becomes something more than lukewarm ourselves. Amen.

Great God of grace, as we move through these days of Lent, deepen within each of us, the sensitivity to your love; and give us, Father, the words, the deeds, the courage to answer, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.